

**Chancellor's Community Forum**  
**Five Year Plan**  
**November 19, 2008**  
**Smothers ES**  
**6:30-8:00PM**  
**Shereen Williams**

**Overview:** Generally the group agreed with the elements of the five year plan, but there were a number of concerns about how the plan is communicated to stakeholders and how to ensure that it is being implemented across the district without compromising school autonomy. One parent felt that the plan is well-intentioned, but feels at places like Smothers, the opposite of the vision is happening. All agreed that we need to do a better job of reaching out to parents to ensure they are on board. There was also concern about making sure all central office staff, principals, teachers, and school staff are incorporating the plan.

**Keywords:** special education, evaluation, coaches, performance plan, professional development, Parent & Family Resource Centers (PFRCs), Office of Out of School Time, performance plan, five year plan, autonomy, principal evaluation, special education reform, performance evaluation, comprehensive staffing model, restructuring school, theme and signature schools, dual-language programs, LSRT

**Presenter/Moderator:** Kaya Henderson, Deputy Chancellor of Human Capital  
Michelle Rhee, Chancellor

**Panelists:** Shereen Williams, Director of Community Partnerships;

**Notes:**

**SW:** Introduced herself and opened up the discussion by having everyone around the room to introduce themselves. Explained the purpose of the blue sheets and encouraged participants to provide as much feedback as possible. Attendees can leave any additional questions with notetaker and we will ensure that someone follows-up.

**CM:** Creating the plan is a good idea for the most part, but everyone should be on the same page—parents, teachers, staff, and principals. There is an art teacher at Smothers. They have a social worker, a psychologist, and a guidance counselor. But even with this entire staff, there are still problems. There is no PTA and a lack of interest in getting involved. I looked around tonight and there were very few parents. There were only six teachers in attendance. We say we want to engage the community. But, when you look around you see the community isn't in the room. But, the community is here and many people want to be involved and engaged. There are nine local churches and all of them have said they want to offer help and support. We don't do a good job of taking advantage of resources that are available.

**SW:** You make many good points. We do have an Office of Community Engagement that is working on improving parental involvement. We are aiming to provide additional outreach opportunities to parents and families through our **Parent & Family Resource Centers (PRCs)**. A lot of our community-based organizations have also been trying to get more involved. For example, Greater DC Cares has been working to try to establish a PTA at Smothers.

**CM:** A lot of people have tried and have failed to accomplish this. Yvette Alexander said she has tried but there is nothing she can do. There is still no PTA or LSRT board. As a parent of a 10 year old who is supposed to receive special education services, I see that the school is not providing what they are supposed to. The same thing goes regarding my 5 year old. I have to get on the phone, call around, write letters, and get an advocate for anyone to do the things they are required to do in the first place.

**CM:** I am content that the 5-year plan doesn't start from scratch. I am also happy with the new **PRCs**, but worry that if parents are not even willing to come to their child's school, they are not going to be likely to go to the **PFRC**.

**SW:** *Are there were any other thoughts on this?*

**CM:** There are great opportunities for parent engagement and this is something the DC Council really wants to see more. This discussion around the plan is a good first step, but agrees with other community members about wanting to see more grassroots parental involvement. When I grew up, my parents and all the parents I knew were a part of the PTA. PTAs are not in all of our schools. There are many groups interested in helping to start them where there are none and even some who are willing to help fund them by matching any revenue they earn. Also, the PTA is supposed to include teachers, but many teachers feel the press is placing the blame solely on them for student shortcomings in achievement. What many of them really want is to be a part of the process. The way to get teachers to buy in is to avoid beating them up and start engaging them in the process of reform.

**CM:** As far as fundraising, the Smithsonian where I work does a lot for local schools (such as science and other educational enrichment activities targeted towards young children). When I brought this to the Principal, it got knocked down. Also, many teachers are giving their best, but they are not being supported by the administration which makes it difficult for them to keep up their energy which affects their students. A lot of teachers need a communication line. A lot of them forget the purpose of what they are here for. There are communication skills across the board that need to be worked on. Teachers who accept the position need to be briefed on the basics of what their purpose is and why they are here.

**SW:** This addresses two very important points. For one, the idea of providing great people. We want teachers who are supported and valued and who feel appreciated. As far as partners, we know that there are lots of great partners involved in our schools.

One of the things our office did was to survey all principals to find out what partners were present in the schools. In one instance, we say one high school reported that they had 32 actively involved partners. Meanwhile, an elementary school responded that they had no partners. This was helpful for her because she could make sure that partners were being allocated to places that needed them. We try to make sure partners and principals are equally aware of the plan and their role. We also want to reach out to more and more volunteers. There are lots of members of the community who really want to volunteer. We want to support them and make sure we are linking them to opportunities where they can meet needs of specific schools.

**CM:** *How did your office determine which organizations and partners are good or bad? How did you decide who would not be allowed to be involved?*

**SW:** We first wanted to basically get an overall assessment of who was in our schools. We have also evaluated whether or not they were looking to work after-school, in the mornings, during the school day, and subsequently, how that was affecting instruction time. The **Office of Out-of-School Time** has a vetting process where they assess what groups and CBOs will be approved to work in our schools. There are full-time after-school coordinators in virtually all of our schools for the first time. There are a number of other organizations that have been talking precisely about the services they can provide (college access, financial aid workshops, etc.). We have created standard Memorandum of Agreements between partners and the central office. The larger partners are a little more difficult to manage because some law firms, churches, and other partners have gotten involved in specific pet projects and one-time commitments.

**CM:** *Will this take place next year?*

**SW:** Yes.

**CM:** We have talked about PRCs and we have a number of service providers and folks who are working and involved in this larger puzzle. I am a fan of the community school model, but this does not appear to be a part of the plan. For instance, if the Smothers student population is experiencing a number of toothaches, we should be equipped to get a health professional in the school who can respond.

**SW:** I agree that the community school is an excellent model. One example of one in Ward 7 is JC Nalle where a number of services are available.

**MR:** We have a number of ways to help people recognize the schools as community buildings. We want our facilities and spaces to be physically able to accommodate a lot of different functions and events. For instance, when building the new Sousa, we made sure there was a parent resource room included in the layout. We made sure this space was wired with computers so that parents can engage in research and have computer access. We ensured that there were health suites. In pulling together the MEP, MFP, and 5-yr plan, we were able to pull all of the needs together. Also, one of the new

models this year is the **full-service model**. This is talked about as a type of **special education reform**, but it's not specific to **special education** students. The idea behind this is to bring in guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists, etc in every school building to provide services to all students. In the past, the only way to get a student these kinds of services they need was to test them for **special education** services. With this model, students get the services they need without having to be identified as **special education**. We have already started implementing this model primarily in some of our **restructuring schools**.

**CM:** At Smothers, we have a social worker, psychologist, and guidance counselor and yet her two sons are not getting their **special education** services. I sent an email on 11/10/2008 explaining that the principal used inappropriate language towards my son. This has not been resolved yet. When it comes to the **five year plan**, I am with it 100%, but I feel like the principals and the teachers have to be on the same page as the Chancellor. The communication between adults and students needs to be improved. Everyone needs to be on the same page.

**MR:** We want every elementary school to have all of the needed resources in place. You are right in that you can put a lot of people in a school, but everyone needs to understand their roles and individual contribution to school culture. This falls under the central offices and our school administrators. We need to ensure that adults are constantly communicating roles and making sure folks are on the same page and listening to all of the different parties to understand what is needed.

**CM:** Another situation at this school is that parents want to get involved, but there is no communication with the principal as far as getting a PTA off the ground. My daughter goes to Woodson and I am happy with the involvement and activities that they are getting there. It is a different world at Smothers.

**MR:** It sounds like engagement is better at Woodson. We are trying to reorient people to what our priority is. The dynamic that has been in place before is that the school system has not been responsive (central office, principal, teacher, and on down). This isn't going to happen over night, but this is the culture-shift that we want to make. When you measure things, it moves. One of the things we are including in **principal evaluations** is parental satisfaction. By making that part of their **performance evaluation**, it will ultimately drive change.

**CM:** You don't want your goals of your plan to be lost because people on the school level are not being engaged.

**CM:** *How do you reconcile **comprehensive staffing model** with principal **autonomy**?*

**MR:** We have definitely started the discussion about **autonomy** in the District, but we need to lay out our philosophy on this clearly. New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein believes that **autonomy** for school leaders is a pre-requisite for success. I

disagree. **Autonomy** should be earned. If you can show that you are able to deliver results, then you deserve to have more autonomy with the budget, staffing, etc. Lots of our schools were doing this ad hoc. But, we believe that it is our duty to ensure that high performing schools and principals are able to continue to succeed without us taking any resources away from them and letting them make the decisions that are best for that school. This is not the case with all schools because some are bound to make bad decisions. I think a lot of principals are happy with the **autonomy** they've been given thus far. We have **theme schools** and **specialty schools** that get more money, but it is unclear as to how they get that money and achieve that status. We are going to lay out guidelines for how a school can find a theme and learn how to access additional money and opportunities. We want people to understand what these things are, how resources get allocated. We have a lot of schools that say they have **dual-language** programs. Some get funded, some don't. They all use different models. We are going to say now that if you want to be a **dual language** program, these are the guidelines you need to follow and these are the benchmarks you need to reach. If you want to keep the resources, this is how you do it.

**CM:** An issue of PTA was brought up but Smothers doesn't actually have one. *How can we help set these up?*

**MR:** Part of the challenge that we face is that there's lots of confusion over parental involvement. There's **LSRT**, HSAs, PTAs, and people don't know what these are and what they need. Right now, it's not required for schools to have PTAs, but it is required that they have **LSRTs** with parents on the panel. We believe every school has to do everything that they possibly can to encourage more parental involvement. If you look at the plan we talk a lot about how to better engage people. **PRCs** are one aspect of this. We want to broaden the base of parents who are involved. In many instances we wind up with a small group of parents who have always been involved and it makes people outside of that circle feel left out. This is something we need to work on.

**CM:** *Is there a school-based **parent coordinator** at each school? Is that the best way to get as many people as possible engaged?*

**MR:** We want to have endless resources in all of our schools, but we don't have it right now. It would be great to have all one in every school, but we don't have that yet.

**SW:** *Any other comments or concerns?*

**CM:** As a former teacher, I want to know what is going to be coming on the teacher side. *For instance, what is the role of **coaches**? Will the **coaches** and other interventions create additional paperwork and present more of a strain to teachers or will they actually help? Does this require a lot of **professional development** that isn't actually needed? Are these **coaches** full-time or are they part-time? Are they really just dead-weight staff that is being pushed aside?*

**SW:** We can follow-up on this. But overall goal is to provide teachers with as much support as possible.

**CM:** Right now, **professional development** in some places results in principal taking all of their students to one place so whole staff can leave for **professional development**. We also need to make sure teachers are getting the kinds of training they need to be successful (effective communication with parents, customer service standards, etc).

**CM:** I have reached out to a number of non-profits who are willing to work at Smothers (namely, Georgetown University, Boys and Girls Club, and the MPD). But, I feel the school is not welcoming to outside partners. My sons are in after-care at Smothers and spent the entire time without getting anything done. No homework was completed. I make a point to check the dc.gov site and to find out what is going on. But, there are not a whole lot of parents here today because the line of communication is broken.

**CM:** The mode of communication that goes out to parents may need to be different. Chairman Gray talked about grass-roots campaign strategies. Maybe it needs to be door-to-door or something else besides back-pack letters. Sometimes folks don't have time to read the letters or get information too late. Maybe the best way is to catch parents with personalized notes, wrapping it into customer service.

**SW:** This came up in the last meeting as well and is definitely good feedback.

**CM:** Some of Chairman Gray's ideas about community schools are great for the kids and also for the parents. If each school had an overall community services coordinator, they can manage bringing in partners the community wants. Maybe they could identify a parent literacy course or if parents wanted a Pilates course, you bring it into the school. We want to figure out how to get parents and teachers better involved, but city government does not do a good job at communicating. When Chairman Gray goes to community meetings across the city, he doesn't see many people besides who he knows. We need to look at what Barack Obama and the Mayor did to reach people. Imagine if the Chancellor went door-to-door (though she wouldn't have time to run the school system). But, I think it would bring our city together.

**CM:** It would be nice for information to be on memos and notices that are personalized. When there is information on field-trips, pot-lucks, etc, there is not a lot of personal outreach to parents.

**SW:** I'm delighted to hear that you all are with us and have so many ideas about community engagement.

**CM:** *What are the next steps for us internally with this document?*

**SW:** With the one year **performance plan**, each one of our departments has pieces of the plan they are responsible for along with metrics to target what they are doing. My role is to focus on getting the volunteer base up and running. I am working on creating a web-base of volunteers and implementing volunteer sign-in logs in all schools to better count who is volunteering on a day-to-day. We want to help schools to build their capacity. Another benchmark is to get volunteer “hubs” up and going. Right now, there is a Jump-Start coalition of CBOs that all focus on providing financial literacy. We are working on getting more groups like that together so that they can work to support each other. All of the folks have a piece of the **performance plan** that they have to own.

**CM:** My main concern is that my kids are at Smothers, but I will not seeing any change here. There are lots of things we want here in this school, but right now the students need mentors and college students in here to show them a different way of life. Some of the students are not getting the things they need at home. There used to be life skills in the school, but they have since taken that out. I really hope that there is a major turn-around in DCPS.

**CM:** Another thing is that instead of looking at what DCPS needs and providing it as a 3-course meal style, we need to focus on what a good school has and should have and then provide all of those things.

**CM:** Back in August, when Mayor Fenty came here, he compared what charter schools have versus what DCPS has. A lot of the charter schools are smaller and offer better education. When my daughter went to Friendship Edison, she learned more in a semester than she ever did with DCPS. In some charter schools, kids are given laptops to use to complete their homework. I feels the charters are doing better than DCPS.

**CM:** Unfortunately charter schools are not all on the same page. I used to work for a charter school and not everything is as good as it seems on the surface. Now that I am on the community side, I see the importance of improving our public schools.

**CM:** My kids have been in DCPS for 10 years and have gotten a lot of really good experiences so far. We need to tell more of the good stories instead of just the negative stuff about all schools being in bad shape.